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ABSTRACT

In spring 1983, a study was conducted at the City Colleges of Chicago to design and implement a treatment to increase student success at the beginning of the semester and to assess teachers' reactions to this treatment. Seven teachers from three departments and a team of researchers worked together to develop a plan that included activities to help teachers: (1) be better organized through, for example, distributing syllabi and course and topic outlines; discussing grade policy, course requirements, and learning resources; outlining attendance policies; and discussing course objectives of the first 3 weeks; (2) be student oriented by, for example, allaying anxiety and tension in the classroom, appearing relaxed, having students introduce themselves, and collecting student data forms; (3) encourage student participation by stressing the importance of asking questions, discussing student involvement requirements, and assigning students to study groups; and (4) provide feedback and correctives for homework assignments and quizzes. Faculty reactions to the treatment, as determined through interviews and questionnaires, were generally positive. All of the teachers agreed on the importance of the overall plan and its positive effects on the students. They did note that more training was necessary in order to plan adequately for the first weeks and that it was difficult to implement all of the activities. A list of treatment procedures and a student involvement checklist are appended. (LAL)

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INCREASING STUDENT SUCCESS EARLY IN THE SEMESTER

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Increasing Student Success Early in the Semester

ABSTRACT

This study examines a set of teaching and learning principles applied during the first three weeks of a college semester. A team of researchers and teachers designed this plan based on the researchers' systematic evidence and the teachers' experience. Previous research has shown that the principles in the plan have improved student performance and sense of success. A key supposition underlying this research is the importance of early success for later success. The present study is specifically concerned with developing and implementing a plan involving these pronciples at the beginning of the semester and determining teacher reactions to the plan.

Increasing Student Success Early in the Semester

Until very recently, few researchers have studied the significance of the initial stages of the school term or year on student outcomes, although educators have long understood the importance of "starting off on the right foot" (Waller, 1932). Recent studies examining teaching during the first few weeks of a class (Emmer, Evertson & Anderson, 1980; and Moskowitz & Hayman, 1976) have found that effective teachers can be reliably distinguished from less effective teachers in the very first days and weeks of school. These studies have shown that better teachers are more competent in establishing control of the class, creating a friendly and supportive learning environment, giving clear directions, orienting students to necessary behaviors, managing time well, and maintaining a task oriented focus. The present study examines a set of teaching principles applied during the first weeks of the college semester through a plan collaboratively designed by teachers and researchers.

This pilot research study considers the application of four principles and processes of teaching and learning that have been demonstrably linked to improved achievement and increased affect on the part of the students. Previous research has shown that these principles have improved students' performance and their sense of success. This study is specifically concerned with developing and implementing a plan involving these principles at the beginning of the semester and determining teacher reactions to the plan.

The four principles of teaching and learning are organized according to the findings of a study by Guskey and Easton (1983) on highly effective teachers in the City Colleges of Chicago. The results of this interview study showed that the very effective teachers shared the following set of common characteristics: 1) they were highly organized and planned carefully; 2) they expressed positive regard for their students; 3) they

emphasized the importance of student participation; and 4) they gave students regular feedback on their work and provided opportunities for students to correct their errors.

The importance of these four principles of teaching and learning can be observed throughout current research findings on teaching. Brophy (1982) has reviewed and summarized the recent educational research literature on effective instruction in elementary basic skills and drawn similar conclusions. It is through these principles that we have attempted to alter students' patterns of success during the first three weeks of the semester.

The first principle, that the teacher is well-organized, has the effect of defining expectations and course objectives for students. The well-organized teacher distributes a class syllabus; discusses course objectives, grading policies and requirements; discusses available college learning resources; and outlines the class attendance policy. These practices leave little room for ambiguity in the students' minds. A high degree of organization provides the students with a clear sense of what is expected in the course and how to accomplish it.

Effective community college teachers express positive regard for their students and appear to have an interest in individual students. These teachers learn names, encourage questions (no matter how basic), ask students to introduce themselves to one another; they smile and consciously attempt to allay student anxiety. Brophy (1982) calls this a "supportive learning environment."

The third principle, emphasizing student participation, means that teachers encourage students to participate actively in the class by asking questions of the teachers and of themselves, by taking notes, by paying attention, and by reviewing before and after class. While application of this principle is mostly up to the student, teachers may set high levels of

expectation for student participation and involvement. Student participation and involvement are clearly linked to successful performance and have received considerable attention from researchers (Bloom, 1976, for example).

The final successful teaching and learning principle is the use of feedback and correctives in the classroom. In this process, testing and reviewing are imbedded in the teacher's instruction. For example, tests, quizzes, or oral questions are used to assess students' knowledge and reviewing or reteaching follows the assessment. This principle, which Brophy (1982) calls "teaching to mastery," is common to effective instruction.

Recent quantitative analysis of the instructional importance and effects of participation and feedback/correctives found strong effects across all levels of schooling, socio-economic levels, races and community types (Lysakowski & Walberg, 1981, 1982). The twenty studies dealing with feedback and correctives showed that students instructed with increased feedback and correctives achieved better than all but seventeen percent of the students under control conditions. Similarly, the twenty-two studies dealing with participation showed that students in increased participation conditions achieved better than all but nineteen percent of students in control conditions.

Guskey and Easton (1983) found that very effective community college teachers spend considerable time before the beginning of the semester in planning, organizing, and setting goals. During the first class, the effective teachers divide class time between reviewing course goals and procedures and setting a positive classroom atmosphere. Although research focused on the early part of the semester has been limited, it has produced a consistent set of findings regarding the importance of the initial class setting for ultimate success.

The correlational and observational research discussed above has discovered what techniques and practices are associated with good teachers. Can average

teachers be trained in these techniques and become better? Other researchers (Guskey & Monsaas, 1979; Good & Grouws, 1979; Stallings, 1980) have successfully trained teachers to adapt teaching strategies that increase student achievement. This study applied the four principles discussed above during the first three weeks of the semester and assessed reactions of participating faculty. A key goal of this project was to develop a teaching strategy based on the practical experience of the teacher plus the systematically collected evidence of the researchers.

PROCEDURE

Participants

Seven teachers, recommended by the college's vice president for academic affairs, volunteered to participate in this study conducted at the Center for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning (CITL). Three of the teachers taught business courses, two mathematics courses, and two English/speech courses. All but one of the teachers had more than ten years of teaching experience; the average was 14 years. Two of the teachers were men, five women; four black and three white. In view of these characteristics (race, experience, and sex) the teachers are representative of their college faculty and of the City Colleges faculty as a whole.

Training and Plan Development

The seven teachers and two CITL researchers met for two three-hour sessions prior to the beginning of the 1983 spring semester and planned specific activities to be used during the first three weeks of the semester. The researchers outlined the four general categories discussed earlier (well-organized teacher, student-oriented teacher, student participation, and feedback and correctives), suggested certain specific activities, then worked with the teachers to prepare lists of procedures to follow during

the first three weeks. Table 1 presents an outline of the activities that the teachers and researchers agreed should be covered in the beginning of the semester. The researchers believed that these activities would apply the four underlining principles and the teachers thought that the activities could be accomplished with little difficulty. At the end of the planning sessions the teachers selected one class as a target for the special treatment.

Under normal conditions teachers follow many of the procedures listed in Table 1, especially those in the "well organized" and "student oriented" categories. This study provided the participating teachers with the opportunity to use these procedures in a more consistent and systematic basis than usual. In addition, this planning process allowed the teachers to think through the reasons and purposes for many of the activities that they follow routinely.

The participants in the study agreed that the feedback/corrective process was the major idea that they would implement. They adapted their quizzes and homework assignments to become an integral part of this process, so that students could use quiz and homework results to guide their studies and would correct errors detected there before continuing to new material. In the case of homework assignments the teachers and students would review the questions that posed difficulties and then check student progress on these questions by reassigning similar problems in the next homework assignment. Similarly, the teachers and students would review quiz questions that students had trouble with, and after students had several opportunities to learn these ideas, they would be retested on a second, parallel quiz. One goal of the feedback/corrective process was to give all students several chances to attain academic success in the early part of the semester.

The teachers and researchers also chose to emphasize student involvement and participation in the classroom as a process essential to student success.

The major vehicle for encouraging greater involvement on the part of students was an eight item self-assessment checklist (see Table 2) that covers areas such as asking questions, seeking help, paying attention, and taking notes. The teachers planned to administer this questionnaire as a teaching tool during the first and third weeks of the semester and to discuss the importance of these skills and their relationship to success with the students. The students were told to refer continually to the questionnaire and the proper involvement skills in order to improve their own habits.

RESULTS

This pilot study developed a set of teaching practices to be applied during the early weeks of a college semester. The results presented here are based on interviews and questionnaires for teachers. The study did not include classroom observation, the analysis of achievement outcomes between control and experimental classes, or any measures of student affect. We propose carefully designed follow-up studies that can detect the effects of this treatment on student achievement, student affect, and teacher satisfaction. This current data should be used in a formative manner to suggest areas where this treatment can be improved.

Teacher Evaluations

The teacher evaluations included both informal interviews and telephone conversations during the first three weeks of the semester plus a follow-up summative questionnaire at the end of the semester. The early data showed that the teachers had difficulty covering all of the material included in the plan in so short a period of time, yet they were very enthusiastic about the plan on the whole. One teacher found that he needed more help with atmosphere and climate setting techniques; another teacher requested more assistance in planning course objectives and a class outline; while others

thought that they needed more help with giving students useful feedback and correctives. The teachers also had to cope with the usual uncontrollable problems: lack of books, schedule changes, and tardiness and late arrival. In spite of lack of time and these difficulties, the teachers were favorable to the plan during the early part of the semester while they were following it.

Toward the end of the semester the participants completed an evaluation form that consisted of 28 short answer items corresponding to the activities (and their subparts) listed in Table 1, plus six essay type questions asking the teachers to make comments and give suggestions for improvement. They responded very favorably to the project. The overall rating for all activities on a scale from 5.0 (extremely useful) to 1.0 (useless) was very nearly equal to the highest possible rating (4.75). Seven of the items had average ratings between 3.0 and 4.0 and the remaining twenty-one items had ratings greater than 4.0.

Teacher written responses were equally positive, for example:

- the class seemed receptive to the suggested schedule and study activities, and more relaxed, as opposed to threatened by the course.
- I believe that the students got to know each other better, developed better study habits, and did more homework.
- the activities caused more student interaction.
- students asked questions when unsure...students were relaxed and friendly with each other.

The most frequently cited criticism of the project was that more time is needed in the first few class meetings to accomplish all the proposed activities.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aims of this study were to combine teacher and researcher expertise to design and implement a treatment to increase student success at the beginning of the semester and to assess reaction to this treatment. The participants in the project developed a plan that includes components to help teachers be better organized, be "student oriented," encourage student participation, and provide feedback and correctives. Seven teachers from three departments in one college at the City Colleges of Chicago helped to develop and test the plan, and provide strong support for the plan. All teachers believed that the strategies were valuable and that they had positive impact on students.

Given the non-experimental design of the study, it is impossible to measure the specific impact of these activities used at the beginning of the semester. Yet, inferences can be drawn concerning the importance of the early weeks of the semester and this pilot study in particular. First, the consistently high ratings by the teachers lend credence to the importance of focusing in the start of the of the semester. All of the teachers agreed to the importance of the overall plan and the positive effect of the plan on the students involved. The teachers did note that more training is necessary in order to plan adequately for the first weeks. The teachers believed that they needed more time in the areas of preparing course objectives and in using quizzes and homework assignments to provide students with feedback and then correctives. Second, the teachers felt that the plan should be fine-tuned so that it did not require so much class time. Finally, teachers and researchers agreed that future studies of this topic should include classroom observation and a more highly controlled research design.

Given the foregoing discussion, we recommend the expansion of research focusing on the early part of a semester. Future studies should pre-test any

strategy to be implemented to insure that enough time is available to cover all important topics. A shorter version of the treatment utilized in this study would be ideal. Any study should be carefully designed with appropriate experimental and control groups to measure the impact of the intervention. Ultimately, some comparisons of student outcomes (achievement and retention rate) must be made. Evaluation of the treatment should also involve some measures of student affect. In addition, classroom observations to determine the degree to which teachers actually implement the plan, as well as the level of attentiveness of students, should be part of the research design.

We also believe that more attention must be given to training teacher participants in the proper use of feedback and correctives. A key supposition underlying this research is the importance of early success. This strategy for increasing early success requires the most efficient feedback and corrective method possible. One possible alternative to the present method would be to retest students on the parallel quizzes only on material missed on the first test. This would maximize opportunity for student improvement.

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Table 1

Procedures to be followed during the first three weeks

The teacher is well organized

-distribute syllabus, course outline, topic outline
-discuss grading policy and course requirements
-discuss learning resources (PLATO, library, audio-visual aids, teacher's office location and hours, campus administrators' names, tutoring and counseling availability)
-outline attendance policy (take roll at beginning of class, 10 minutes late is tardy)
-discuss course objectives of the first three weeks
-start class promptly

The teacher is student oriented

-allay anxiety and tension in the classroom
-appear relaxed, low-keyed; smile
-students introduce themselves to each other
-distribute and collect student data form

The teacher encourages student participation

-stress the importance of asking questions (no question is too simple)
-discuss student involvement checklist (see Table 2)
-assign students to three person study groups

The teacher provides feedback and correctives

-give two homework assignments using the following pattern: assign homework, review homework, correct homework errors, reassign the questions that students had trouble with in the next assignment
-give two sets of quizzes using the following pattern: administer form A of quiz, review common errors in class, use study group correctives and individual correctives, and retest errors on quiz form B

Miscellaneous

-teach easily achievable information during the first few classes
-give homework assignments due at the earliest possible date making sure that students who haven't bought the textbook yet can also do the homework

Table 2

Student Involvement Checklist

Read the following sentences and check the response that best desrcibes how you behave in this class.

Use these responses:

Always	Sometimes	Not Often	Never
_____	_____	_____	_____

When I have trouble understanding something I ask the teacher about it.

I dig into my textbook when I am uncertain about something.

I seek tutorial help when I need it.

I try to answer the teacher's questions in my mind, and think about why my answer is right or wrong.

I pay attention during class, even when things get pretty dull.

I raise my hand in order to answer the teacher's questions.

I take notes in class and review my notes and assignments before going to class.

I come to class everyday on time and I get to work very quickly.

College students who receive high grades have learned ways to get involved in their work, and can respond "always" or "sometimes" to most of these questions. Paying attention, asking questions, taking notes, and seeking help when needed are all linked to better achievement.

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